

How to Write a Biography

A biography is simply the story of a life. Biographies can be just a few sentences long, or they can fill an entire book—or two.

- Very short biographies tell the basic facts of someone's life and importance.
- Longer biographies include that basic information of course, with a lot more detail, but they also tell a good story.

Biographies analyze and interpret the events in a person's life. They try to find connections, explain the meaning of unexpected actions or mysteries, and make arguments about the significance of the person's accomplishments or life activities. Biographies are usually about famous, or infamous people, but a biography of an ordinary person can tell us a lot about a particular time and place. They are often about historical figures, but they can also be about people still living.

Many biographies are written in chronological order. Some group time periods around a major theme (such as "early adversity" or "ambition and achievement"). Still others focus on specific topics or accomplishments.

Biographers use primary and secondary sources:

- Primary sources are things like letters, diaries, or newspaper accounts.
- Secondary sources include other biographies, reference books, or histories that provide information about the subject of the biography.

To write a biography you should:

1. Select a person you are interested in
2. Find out the basic facts of the person's life. Start with the encyclopedia and almanac.
3. Think about what else you would like to know about the person, and what parts of the life you want to write most about. Some questions you might want to think about include:

1. What makes this person special or interesting?
2. What kind of effect did he or she have on the world? other people?
3. What are the adjectives you would most use to describe the person?
4. What examples from their life illustrate those qualities?
5. What events shaped or changed this person's life?
6. Did he or she overcome obstacles? Take risks? Get lucky?
7. Would the world be better or worse if this person hadn't lived? How and why?

John F. Eaton (1886-1967)

1886 Born in Boston, Massachusetts

1911 Earned Bachelor's Degree from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in electrochemistry

1911 Enrolled in Harvard Graduate School as a philosophy and psychology student

1912 Went to Germany to study for his PhD examination.

1915 Earned Doctorate from Harvard after his dissertation studying retroactive inhibition

1915 Began teaching at Northwestern University

1916 Married Susan Thompson at Boston, Massachusetts

1918 Began teaching at University of California Berkeley

1942 Published numerous papers about psychology

1959 Received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of California

1967 Died January 19th

John F. Eaton (1886-1967)

John F. Eaton was an American psychologist who made significant contributions to the studies of learning and motivation. Eaton was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1886. He remained there as he grew up and was educated in public schools. He lived in a family of "upper middle" socioeconomic status and had a father who was the president of a manufacturing company. His brother, Robert, was five years older than he was and both he and Robert were expected to go into the family business.

He and his brother decided to seek academic careers, against their family's wishes. Both went on to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Robert pursued a career in academics, ultimately becoming a world-renowned theoretical chemist and physicist, and John initially sought a bachelor's degree in electrochemistry. Eaton changed the course of his career during his senior year. He decided to become a philosopher. After graduation in 1911, he attended summer school and took a course in philosophy and psychology. He concluded that he wasn't quite smart enough for philosophy and that psychology was more to his liking.

That coming fall, Eaton enrolled at the Harvard Graduate School as a philosophy and psychology graduate student. At that time, the disciplines were a combined department. After his first year as a graduate student, he went to Germany to study for his PhD examination in German (at that time all PhD examinations were conducted in French, German, or Russian).

He received his doctorate in 1915. Eaton became an instructor at Northwestern University and taught for three years after receiving his doctoral degree. He described himself as being self-conscious, inarticulate, and fearful of his classes.

Eaton went on to become an instructor at the University of California in Berkeley in the fall of 1918 where he remained for the rest of his life. He married Susan Thompson; they had 3 children, Joseph, Susan and Grace.